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The sufficiency of the grounds for faith in immortality

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THE SUFFICIENCY OF THE GROUNDS FOR FAITH
IN IMMORTALITY

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It is noteworthy that the mysteries that have challenged the thinking of the prophets of the ages have been the mysteries of goodness. These listeners for the voice of God and forth-tellers of the messages of God have been initiated into unspeakably precious realities, realities most real to them but incapable of conveyance by word of wisdom or by proof of logic. Love, Grace, Goodness, Godliness, Christlikeness, Immortality, overtop the processes of thought. That men have been and are possessors of these gleams of the ever-conquering love of God who can deny? That which is inexplicable in terms of empirical causation is known to those who have come into possession of the Life which includes these terms. Christ's problem is to get new and greater desires to blossom and to come to fruitage in man, desires for infinite things. The reach must always exceed the grasp. The heart must forever be throbbing for an attainment that lies beyond the

present consummation. It may be objected, then, that we are dealing with an idealistic theory of life. Even so. For the purpose of this paper there is no other basis for faith in immortality. Immortality is the belief that the soul or spirit of man is an indestructable substance, more real, and therefore more enduring, than the body in which it is temporarily housed; indeed, with the exception of the Absolute Spirit, the most real, and the most enduring thing in the entire universe.

History universally shows that the normal thought of the race is that man's life is not extinguishable by death. Even in his most remote and least developed condition the thought of non-survival after death was intolerable to him. While incapable of definitely defining the conception of immortal life, he, however, looked toward a continued existence. This belief, spontaneous and strong among primitive peoples, is the faith of the many with a people as rich in civilization and speculative capacity as the Greeks. To Plato, the soul is the divine element in man, a spark of the eternal reason which is the creative principle in the universe.

As such it is as imperishable as God himself. In the life to which Plato looks forward, the body has no place. It is a curse rather than a blessing, a shackle rather than an aid. Not activity, but thought, not struggle, but contemplation, not passion, but peace, characterize the immortal life for which he longs. Life, to Socrates, was all of a piece. He pictured continuity of experience, of tasks and interests. What greater happiness could be his "than to continue in the other world the service to which God had called him here, examining the heroes of old, Agamemnon, or Odysseus, or Sisyphus, to see which of them was wise and which was foolish, though wise in his own esteem - a missionary, as it were, to the spirits in prison?" Orpheus and his followers believed that the soul was divine in origin and spiritual in nature, that it had been imprisoned in the body as a penalty for sins committed in a former existence, and that deliverance was possible only through purification and abstinence. Here first in the Western world we meet with transmigration as a religious doctrine, a living faith affecting faith and determining hope.

Starting on the same basis as other primitive peoples, the religious thinkers of Israel won their way step by step. At the beginning, the future life was an object of dread rather than of desire. The righteous may look forward to long life, prosperity, riches, earthly success and happiness of every kind in this life. In the grave, whither man goes at death, there is neither knowledge nor activity, neither happiness nor usefulness, neither morality nor religion. "In death there is no remembrance of thee; in Sheol who shall give thee thanks?" (Ps.6:5). Sheol is not a place of suffering so much as a place of emptiness and monotony. It is a land of darkness and of chaos.

With the early religious teachers of Israel, the moral unit is the nation, not the individual. The pious Israelite confidently expected the national purging from sin with its national and personal benefits. The experiences of the Exile bring a national emancipation - an emancipation from political bondage into preeminent spiritual leadership. Great thinkers, like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, give birth to the distinctive contribution of the religion of

the religion of Israel to the doctrine of immortality. With Jeremiah, the individual comes to stand in direct relation to Jehovah. He makes religion a personal matter. His own experience as he wrestled with God taught him a new and deeper conception of the divine purpose. Not Israel, as such, but the pious in Israel, constitute the true object of Jehovah's care and the subject of his redemptive purpose. They are the good figs which he separates from the bad figs which are destined for destruction (Jer.xxiv. 1-10). They are the good deed from which the house of Israel and of Judah is to be renewed (Jer.xxxi. 27).

Ezekiel is even more outspoken in his individualism. The nation was destroyed. The exiles were being punished. He asserts that every individual stands in independent relation to Jehovah. His destiny is in no way determined by anyone else. Nor is it determined by his own past. Ezekiel ignores the fact that the individual is now in a world where solidarity and heredity are unescapable factors.

This new and profound conception of the worth of the individual reaches its finest expression in the sacrificial service rendered by the Suffering

Servant of Jehovah (Isa. xlix. 6, 7; liii. 4-6).

Whatever our interpretation of Isaiah liii., this great passage has given Christian thought its clearest picture of the suffering Christ. Whether we conceive the Servant as an individual or as the personification of all the faithful sufferers of Israel, it is clear that we are dealing with convictions born of profoundest personal experience. Such a conception could not fail to issue in the belief in individual immortality.

"It was a momentous step when the soul in its relations to God ventured to take its stand upon itself, to trust itself! This the author of the book of Job asserts for his hero. The main purpose of the poet is to assert the moral rights of personality. Job knows he is a moral being. He cannot deny his primal certainties. He vindicates his rights against wanton infringements not only at the hands of man, but also at the hands of a despotic God. He does not, for a moment, assert that he is sinless, but he knows that he is guiltless of the crimes of which he is suspected. He defies the traditional belief which connected all suffering with sin. No argument can induce him to declare himself guilty against his better

knowledge. "The doctrine of man's dignity receives in the person of Job its noblest exposition in all ancient literature". His faith, forged in the furnace of affliction, is in a God who loves and who can be loved. His plea is for a reasonable service based upon the moral affinity and the mutual understanding of God and man. When it becomes apparent that Job can never get justice in this world, he suddenly rises to grapple with the last enemy, to put his foot on the neck of death. His soul cry, "apart from my flesh shall I see God," may ultimately become all mankind's invincible hope of eternal life in the presence of God.

The men who gave us our Psalms knew the way of fortification and victory. When adversaries jeer at them and ask, "Where is now thy God?" their confidence is firm. Even "when the waters roar and are troubled", when "desolations are abroad in the earth", God abides for them "a very present help in the time of trouble", "a refuge and strength" for their souls. They rest their case on God alone, and build on naked faith in his goodness and care. "Thou hast delivered my soul from death, mine eyes from tears, and my feet

from fallingⁿ. These great souls cared only to find God and to enjoy Him.

Continually with thee:
 Thou hast holden my right hand.
 Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel,
 And afterward receive me into glory.
 My flesh and my heart faileth;
 But my God is the strength of my heart,
 and my portion forever.
 - Psalm lxxiii.23,24,26.

Even clearer is the teaching of Psalms xvi.8-11 and xvii.15:

I have set Jehovah always before me:
 Because he is at my right hand I shall not
 be moved.
 Therefore my heart is glad and my glory
 rejoiceth:
 My flesh also shall dwell in safety.
 For thou wilt not leave my soul in Sheol:
 Neither wilt thou suffer thy holy one to
 see corruption.
 Thou wilt show me the path of life:
 In thy right hand are pleasures forevermore.
 As for me I shall behold thy face in
 righteousness:
 I shall be satisfied when I awake with behold-
 ing thy form.

The Old Testament portrays a development of an assured faith in God's universal moral government, a continuance of his love and power in the realm of the dead, a consciousness of the extension and triumph of His Kingdom on earth and a belief in a universal resurrection and final judgment ushering

in the rewards and punishments of the last day. This development does not end with the Old Testament but includes in its sources the later non-canonical literature of Israel. The extension continues an unbroken course from the earliest records to the year when Jesus first made his public proclamation of the approaching Kingdom of God.

The risen Lord must first be presented to the faith of men before the picture of the incorruptible life, in all the breadth and reach of its inspiring significance, could consistently be sketched. As for the resurrection of Jesus, we have to do with an event of transcendent importance for Christian faith and life. There is no valid disproof of the essential facts. "We have the fact that a man of Paul's moral potency and intellectual fibre, on the basis of data gathered within a few years of Christ's death, specified as vouchers for the actual appearance of the risen Christ a full list of witnesses, the majority of whom were still alive at the time he wrote. We have the unanimous testimony of the New Testament historians to the fact of the empty tomb. We have the concurrent testimony of Paul and all the evangelists

to the appearance of Christ to the whole apostolic company. We have the fact that there was manifestly at work in the company of the disciples, very soon after the crucifixion, a mighty creative power such as well might flow from a great and unique event like the resurrection. We have the record of Christ's own forecast of his resurrection closely linked with the true prophecy of His violent death. We have the consideration that the resurrection may most reasonably be reckoned as a completing factor in the office of Saviour so prominently associated with Christ in the Gospels. Surely all this makes a basis upon which faith can rest without being in the slightest degree amenable to the charge of triviality or venturesomeness!

"The real historical evidence for the resurrection is the fact that it was believed, preached, propagated, and produced its fruit and effect in the new phenomenon of the Christian Church, long before any of our gospels were written....It is not this or that in the New Testament - it is not the story of the empty tomb, or of the appearing of Jesus in Jerusalem or in Galilee - which is the primary evidence for the resurrection: it is the New Testament

itself. The life that throbs in it from beginning to end, the life that always fills us again with wonder as it beats upon us from its pages, is the life which the risen Saviour has quickened in Christian souls. The fact for faith is the continued existence and supremacy of Jesus, and this is a fact in the realm of spirit. He has become an ever-living, environing, permeating Spirit, continuing His revelation, re-living His life, extending His sway in men of faith. He is no longer of one date and one locality, but is present to open, responsive hearts everywhere. We are not comfortless and alone in a world of pain and loss and death. We are bound as living twigs in one sap-giving Vine of Life. We are participants of the vitalizing, refreshing, joy-bearing bread and water of life. We have open access to the infinite healing and comfort and fortification of the Eternal Christ.

Jesus has left us no doubt as to his faith in immortality. It is grounded in the inherent relationship between the spirit of the human child and that of the divine Father in whose image he is made. His answer to the Sadducees, recorded in Matthew xxii.23-33, positively asserts that, "God is

not the God of the dead, but of the living! That which he made and for which he cares cannot perish. The life that Abraham began to live with God in the plains of Haran centuries ago he is still living today. Death may be a change, but it is not a break. The life beyond is a life of spiritual communion with God. It is moral continuity. The same impression of continuity is confirmed by the parable of Dives and Lazarus (Luke xvi.19-31). Dives reaps what he has sown, and recognizes the justice of his fate. Lazarus, in Abraham's bosom, enjoys the peace that is his right. What more striking witness to the persistence of moral values than Jesus' answer to the penitent thief, "Today thou shalt be with me in Paradise"? (Luke xxiii.43). Thus do the synoptics record the point of view of Jesus in the matter of immortality. These are simply representative instances.

In the Fourth Gospel we have the teaching of Jesus mediated through another consciousness. The impression gained is the same as from the Synoptics. It is the assurance that the values here experienced cannot ever be lost because they are grounded in the nature of things, which is only another way of expressing the loving purpose of God our Father,-

"Let not your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will receive you unto myself, that where I am there may ye be also. And whither I go, ye know the way. Thomas saith unto him, Lord, we know not whithér thou goest; how know we the way? Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, and the truth and the life; no one cometh unto the Father but by me!"

(xiv.1-6)

What Jesus taught gets its flavor from what He was. Jesus lived such a life as to make it incredible that he should die. With Jesus, person and work were blended into an indissoluble unity. He showed us once for all what man at his best may be, and so made belief in his ultimate destruction forever impossible. He raises our conception of humanity as a whole to a higher level. He discloses to us all capacities within ourselves which justify our instinctive hope. In the new experience of sonship into which he leads us, He gives us the pledge of endless life in the Father's house. In the measure that humanity produces characters that are like Christ will faith in an immortality

of Christlikeness seem reasonable.

What was the new and distinctive thing in Jesus' teaching, if not his insistence upon the worth of the human soul as such? "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John iii.16). "What is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matt.xvi.26). The inherent worth of personality has, indeed, always been the real foundation of belief in immortality. Personality is the most complete unity in the universe, and it binds forever into an indissoluble and integral whole the outer and the inner, the spirit and the deed. "Personality carries in all its larger aspects inevitable implications of a spiritual universe. In the first place, it is forever utterly impossible to find a materialistic or naturalistic origin for personality. Wherever we deal with 'matter' or with 'nature' consciousness is always presupposed, and the 'matter' we talk about or the 'nature' we talk about, is 'matter' or 'nature' as existing for con-

sciousness and as conceived by consciousness. It is impossible to get any world at all without a uniting, unifying, connecting principle of consciousness, which binds fact to fact, item to item, event to event, into a whole which is known to us through consciousness, as an organizing agent. Since it is through consciousness that a connected universe of experience is possible it seems absurd to suppose that consciousness is a product of matter, or of any natural, mechanical process. Every effort to find a genesis of knowledge in any other source than Spirit, has always failed, and, from the logical nature of the case, must fail. There is no answer to the question, How did we begin to be persons? which does not refer the genesis to an external Spiritual Principle in the universe, transcending space and time, life and death, matter and motion, cause and effect - a Principle which itself is the condition of temporal beginnings and temporal changes and ends....There are deeps in our consciousness which no private plumb line of our own can sound; there are heights in our moral conscience which no ladder of our human intelligence can scale; there are spiritual hungers, longings, yearnings, passions, which find no explanation in terms of our physical

inheritance or of our outside world. We touch upon the coasts of a deeper universe not yet explored or mapped, but no less real or certain than this one in which our mortal senses are at home".

It may be pertinent to inquire as to the bearings of the results of the researches of modern science in the field which we are now discussing. Has modern science undermined the findings of history as to the persistency and development of faith in immortality? Is credence still to be placed in the faith of Jesus in immortality? Is the spiritual origin and content of personality affected?

Under the magic touch of modern science the boundaries of the universe have enormously expanded. We recognize that our earth is but one of the planets of the sun which, vast as it is, is but one of a innumerable company of stars. "Instead of inhabiting a world created by God in six days of twenty-four hours each, and having a history that can be compressed into six thousand years, our thought ranges backward and forward through innumerable ages without finding any stopping place. We see the whirling gases which constitute the raw material of worlds

contracting into suns, and these suns throwing off planets which, in turn, cool until they reach a temperature capable of supporting life. We see species appearing, one after another in the vegetable kingdom and in the animal. We behold a ruthless struggle for existence, in which the weak go to the wall. We see the same struggle repeating itself in human history, race contending with race for the mastery, and individual with individual. Civilization succeeds civilization, and philosophy, philosophy. New religions rise upon the ruins of the faiths which have preceded them, and within each the old lives on in new forms, and under different names. The accepted formulae of the past no longer do justice to the complexity of the phenomena. The lines that used to mark off period from period, and age from age, are blurred. All seems to be in a state of flux!

The same methods have revolutionized our psychology. Instead of one self, modern psychology discovers many selves. Each moment creates its new self. Each change in the mental state has its parallel in some corresponding change in the nervous system. The removal of a clot of blood from pressing upon a

certain spot in the brain may bring about a moral regeneration incapable of production by any other means.

These tendencies are reinforced by the breaking down of the older conception of religious authority. The conception of the Bible as an inerrant book, consistent in teaching from cover to cover, equally authoritative for history and science, as for ethics and religion, has been replaced for many by the new view which sees in it the record of a progressive revelation.

On every hand, we are struck with the change of mood. For many, the ground for faith in immortality has been swept away. Some have accepted high-sounding and empty substitutes. Some have made their way into a far-reaching skepticism. Others, and they are an ever-increasing number, have an enlightened, a purged, and a more virile faith. They have discovered wherein Revelation is authoritative. They know that it is the business of science to tell how natural phenomena (the realm where things appear in the describable terms of space and time and causality) act and what are their unvarying laws. They have charted the field of science.

They have surrendered themselves to the Life-giving and Life-sustaining power of revelation. For them, "Evolution seems to be due to a mighty, living, driving, conscious force, that is pouring itself forth in ever heightening ways of manifestation and that differentiates itself into myriad varieties of form and activity, each with its own peculiar potency of advance". For them "biologists of the most eminent rank have all along been insisting that life has not evolved through the operation of one single factor; for example, the law of competing struggle. Everywhere in the process, from lowest to highest, there has been present the operation of another force as primary as the egoistic factor, namely the operation of mutual aid, cooperation, struggle for the life of others, mother-traits and father-traits, sacrifice of self for the group, of a love factor, implicit at the bottom but gloriously conscious and consecrated at the top".

Psychology, like all sciences, proceeds by analysis and limitation. Its field is phenomena. The man it reports upon is a naturalistic man, as completely describable as the botanist's flower. The described, naturalistic man is not a real, existing,

living, acting man possessed of interior experience. He is a constructed man. Science has furnished us no evidence which compels us to give up believing in the reality of a personal conscious self, capable of intercourse, fellowship, friendship and love with other personal selves. The spirit of man is capable of immediate experience with God. There is something in man, a "soul-center" or "an apex of soul" which directly apprehends God.

Science has nowhere furnished evidence against the reality of a great spiritual universe, at the heart and center of which is a living, loving, Person. Jesus so reported. The very warp and woof of his entire revelation is that there is a Father-God who is Love and Life and Light and Spirit. This divine Person is "our Father". His universe is not a mere play of forces, nor limited to things we see and touch and measure. His universe is fundamentally spiritual as found in the revelation of personal life. Jesus came to bring the life of persons into an abundant life like His own.

It makes no difference what world one may eventually be in - if only it is still a world of

spiritual issues - goodness, holiness, likeness to God, will still constitute blessedness as they do in this world. They who have been doing deeds of love, saying kind words, relieving human need, banishing human loneliness, making life easier and more joyous, because they caught the spirit of love and tenderness find themselves at home with God, drawn into His presence, crowned with His approval, and sealed with His fellowship. Their spontaneous and uncalculating love was one in essence and substance with the love of God. The more the soul spends itself in love, so much the more love it has, the richer it grows, the diviner its nature becomes. Our love never reaches its full scope and measure until it takes on the eternal aspect. One reason why love is exalted by death is that we no longer love our immortal loved one in any narrow or selfish way. We love now for pure love's sake.

"Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (I John iii.2). He makes us sure that His kind of life is divine, and

that in His face we are seeing the heart and mind and will of God. We see life become, as it was with Him, a radiant thing, and death becomes, as with Him, a way of going to the Father. We can use as our own the inscription on the wall of the ancient Temple in Egypt. One one of the walls a priest of the old religion had written for his divinity, "I am he who was and is, and ever shall be, and my veil hath no man lifted". On the opposite wall someone who had found his way into the later, richer, faith, wrote this inscription, "Veil after veil have we lifted and ever the face is more wonderful!" Seer, teacher, prophet, evangelist, apostle, each lifted the veil. Yea, more, God hath unveiled Himself in Christ. We see Jesus crowned with glory and honor - Jesus who said, "Whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die....Because I live, ye shall live also!"

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